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LOOKING BACK-FORWARD AT THE #GILETSJAUNES: A TAKING STOCK

NONPOLITICS GTILET JAUNES, RIOT

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We begin with a critical appraisal of the movement from the *Temps Critiques* collective, followed by a more apologetic note, and in turn a response from the collective.

Without wishing, or being able to close the issue, it can be said that what separates the two sides of this debate is an interpretation or analysis of capitalism. For the *Temps Critiques* collective, to the extent that the movement fails to contest the conditions of contemporary commodity production, while failing to see the dismantling of the State, the privatisation of daily life in all of its many domains, it is a failed movement. What our apologist, Dietrich Hoss, defends is that the movement has shattered processes of capitalist subjectivisation, which opens up possibilities and potentialities unforeseen before its eruption.

It is our conviction that the two views in fact complement each other, but the theoretical work for this union still awaits.

What can remain from the yellow vests' movement

(Temps Critiques/Lundimatin#196)

We said in March that the movement had reached a crest. What about today that the number of demonstrators, and those present at the General Assemblies, declines, that the roundabouts are not recovered? How can one continue to say: "We will not give up anything", without being in denial of the weakening of the movement? It is for all of these reasons that it seems appropriate to us to evoke a simple question: what can remain of a movement like this? This is a question that requires leaving aside the short term on what can still be done here and now, without projecting oneself into an illusory "it will resume in September, with the preparation of Macron's new measures that will only worsen the situation".

We have "Straightened our backs ... [1]

The exercise is not a simple one, because we lived a long and intense struggle (6 months of mobilisation and struggles). We do not reduce this movement to its practical forms: roundabout occupations, actions at tolls or commercial areas, determined

demonstrations, popular assemblies, etc. No, behind that, what seems essential is to have “straightened our backs”. We have indeed refused to negotiate for our freedom to demonstrate and circulate, we have taken them, because the legitimacy of our revolt can not be contained by a legality that reduces to nothing our capacities to express ourselves and act.

Through our actions, we have encountered all kinds of life paths and we have widened a horizon beyond all political differences, of generation, of sex, of habitation; differences that suddenly appeared only as divisions. Only social urgency, the realization that it is no longer possible and the determination to act, to make it stop, have brought us together. That’s why the yellow vests carry their heads high, despite all the contempt they have suffered from the media, politicians, from all of those who have an interest in the continuation of the status quo of the society of capital. And again, despite this, the disdain shown to them by many more, Macronians without knowing it, of the Left, who for the most part, are chained to and buried in their small identities, their small differences, their small ideological niches.

... and revealed the imperious nature that is hidden behind the management of the reproduction of social relations”

The movement against the labor law had unveiled the new tendencies of repressive policies against social movements, but they had expressed themselves only in marginal ways, as in the treatment of the “heads of demonstration marches [cortèges de tête]” or in the “excesses” of [the police interventions] Nantes and Sivers. But with the multiple attempts to dislodge/destroy the cabins and the entire area of Notre-Dame-des-Landes by the police, then with the more extensive and comprehensive crackdown on the yellow vests, since November 2018, we find ourselves before a systematic, if not systemic, logic. The voluntary attacks on the bodies of the protesters are no longer mere excesses; the criminalisation/penalisation of the least act of resistance becomes the norm, prevention measures no longer correspond to a targeting of elements deemed dangerous, but are intended to prevent demonstrations.

Nevertheless, from this last struggle, we begin anew armed with a rare solidarity, reinforced by all the moments lived together in adversity.

The state has shown its face of violence, that of everyday life, which before we only conceived of in solitude, each in her/his own corner, and that which raged in the street, many did not know, except indirectly.

This brutal repression against anonymous people, people with nothing, does not have the same meaning as the repression against the students of May 68, certainly violent also, but which led to the mass uprising of almost a whole generation supported by the benevolence, sometimes active, of the greater part of the population, at least until the end of May. Here, today, it is not a question of repressing, but of terrorising the demonstrators and by capillarity the sympathisers who could eventually join them. This has been partly successful, the yellow vests’ movement is gradually reducing to its hard core and very few people have joined after its December high.

When politics descends onto the street in the face of a power that does not do politics, it is no longer formal democracy that presents itself before us, the one that is enshrined in the rule of law, but an imperious state ready to silence anyone who takes seriously unvarnished freedom, concrete freedom in its various forms of expression.

The demand for concrete freedom is the only positivity which a movement wholly directed towards negation (of representation, of negotiation) expresses, with so many “claims” (almost fifty) that they cancel each other out and which prove to be nonnegotiable, even if by chance they had found a faction of power willing to start negotiating them. Faced with a government that did not want to let go of anything, it is the latter which finally took the initiative. First of all, by targeting some basic points of social and fiscal justice (reduction of the CSG [*Contribution Sociale Généralisée*: a general progressive tax that serves to finance France’s social security and unemployment insurance, in addition to that which is taxed on employees salaries] and the indexation of modest pensions, exceptional bonuses). Seemingly few things, but more than the unions had obtained in the last ten years. Next, in skirting the demand for citizen participation (via the RIC – *Référendum d’initiative citoyenne*) by proposing a “Great Debate” against which the “True Debate” of the yellow vests, finally modeled on the original, could only appear as a pale copy.

A fundamental negativity of a movement on which there is nothing to “capitalise” ...

Yet from the very heart of the movement, we already hear this horrible expression from those who, in one way or another, do not want to lose ... to start from scratch and therefore for whom, “you have to capitalise on the movement”. A very natural reaction when one has the impression of having only been fighting for six months, but a reaction that we can only reject from the political point of view. It takes many forms. There are those who give it a communalist form with the Assemblies of assemblies which seek to survive without any notion of a relation of power, of the situation of the movement,[2] or a municipalist and civic form with the local RIC and future participation in municipal councils.[3] There are those who want to form themselves as a “people” through calls for direct and citizen democracy with the RIC present in all matters and their will to become constituents, whereas the movement included, from the beginning, a strong destituent desire (the permanent “dégagisme”) and expressed a negative politics. For others, finally, the movement will have been only a point of departure (insufficient) to try to stop the decline of the labour unions, by playing the base against the leadership through the call for a “convergence of struggles”, which has more often than not, remained a one way proposition [to sustain the unions]. This is because the time of the struggle, which is of the order of event, is not the same as course of daily struggles.

For all these trends to capitalise on the “gains”, the [european] election result had the double paradoxical effect of on the one hand a cold shower (Macron did not come in at less than 10%, something that many had hoped more or less secretly), and on the other hand, the confirmation that it was necessary to save what could be saved.

At the beginning of the movement, at the end of November 2018, *Temps Critiques* asked itself if a co-extension of the struggles was possible.[4] Our eyes have had time to focus on this subject and, for example, it is without any illusions regarding the fantasies of convergence, the lip-service support of certain unions as well as the modest attempts in this direction by the ecological Left. All these attempts were marked by failure and rendered the very idea obsolete. That today some see support for future struggles marks a return to settled forms unable to think the possible and even probable death of the movement. In reality the mass vanguard dimension of the yellow vests frightened, and frightened above all those in power, including those who aspire to take over ... So we see how this fact could change without the loss of the singularity, the new potentiality that came with the yellow vests.

Just as some, at the time, saw in May-68 only a general rehearsal before the revolution, others today already announce the resumption of struggles at the beginning of the Fall season, given the Macronian measures underway or planned; the same causes are supposed to have the same effects. In both cases, there is a misunderstanding of what a historical movement is and therefore of a movement that is an event and then adopts its own temporality far from that which exists, for example, in the everyday conflicts in companies, in the attempts by groups of employees to gain some autonomy with respect to the logic labour union activity, etc. In this the yellow vests' uprising is not a social movement in the sense that we have heard speak of since the 1980s; the years after which it becomes difficult to speak in terms of class struggle. In effect, the yellow vests' uprising is not the result of an opposition between the interests of social agents or categories and the state, mediated by social partners; a conflict in which the unions were both the advocates for these interests and the co-managers of the political compromise between classes within the welfare state. With the yellow vests' movement, we are dealing with a direct confrontation between a fraction of the population and the State, because the first no longer tolerates further mediation and because the second has done everything to weaken them. Hence the violence of the confrontation and a sudden movement that will very quickly reach a very high speed.

But as is said in the current language, the train that passes will not pass again and thus, after six months, it is clear that not many people have gotten on, even if some have fumbled with the step. The decisive moment was December. The moment when the movement knew its greatest strength (between the 1st and the 8th of December) and also its biggest street repression, completed with the destruction of cabins and tents at roundabouts, in the beginning of January, along with the crushing of the secondary school movement, whose pallid sequel was the Youth for climate movement; a sign of the recovery in hand by the coalition of powers, that even if they did not promote the latter, at least supported it.[5]

... and for which to endure for the sake of enduring can only mean the loss of meaning

Of course, since then, the movement has continued, but as if outside of the event it produced; outside of its revolutionary and insurrectional dimension. It is now only a question then of lasting to last and thus of organising “events” (in the weak or spectacular meaning of the term) or to attach oneself to other's events, as can be seen in this month of June, with calls from yellow vests' groups to join the “Pride March”, as a new act of the yellow vests.

Either this, or let itself be cut off the forces that made the event, in the strong and historical sense of the term, because every Saturday was like the announcement of a possible changeover into something else.

A sign of this tendency to persist – and thus to take other forms – is reflected in the fact that positions are now asserted which surreptitiously pass from the “We Are All Yellow Vests” of 2018 to the “All Together” of 1995. For these, it would be a way of responding to the isolation of the movement and the obvious failure of “convergence”. A double-handed failure, that of struggles too embryonic to not be included in a yellow vests' movement (see the example of the “stylos rouges/red pens” of education); that of activists and strikers who have no desire to be assimilated to the yellow vests (the example of *Blouses blanches/White coats*). It must be clearly seen that whatever their level of radicality, these struggles remain those of professional categories, defined by their threatened statuses or deteriorating working conditions, whereas what is specific to the yellow vests was to have left all of this at the door of the movement by referring to the general conditions of life, conditions which violently reveal one's state as dominated and not any particular conditions of exploitation in a workplace. This different position in relation to power and domination has led to an intrinsic difficulty in bringing struggles closer together. An almost objective difficulty to which is added a subjective difficulty, that of the often unfavorable evaluation of the nature of the yellow vests' movement by other social forces. A movement that would not be politically correct, a movement that would be uncontrollable because it refuses any direction or leadership, a movement that ultimately scares everyone (the powers in place as well as protected segments of wage labor), although many would like to instrumentalise it for their benefit.

Some “lessons” to retain?

Without saying that the movement is over, it seems urgent to us to put forward what it reveals, from the point of view of the movement, although this is sometimes in its defending body:

- The “people” do not exist. The yellow vests could only run up against a wall from the moment it became clear that their will to set themselves up as a people, ran up against the harsh reality that they were only its partial representation. The people in action, in a way, because in action it soon became apparent that they were, at best, only their de facto vanguard. A whole reflection would have to be made on this point and on the impasses that a criticism limited to the 1% of the richest, the elites, and attacks against the patrimonial oligarchy of the Pinault-Arnault and other banks, represent, while at the same time, globalisation and financialisation attack oligarchical positions in order to make them more fluid and flexible, in order to find new equilibria between old and new modes of domination.
- Avant-garde in fact, we say, and not by right, because it is this legitimacy that will be denied them by all the powers in place, political, media and trade union, up to and including among the extreme Left and libertarian circles.
- A movement that has experienced confrontation with the State as the basis for mass action, and not just as small groups of activists. But a movement that still seeks its relationship to what is the State in general, as indicated by the proposals for upcoming demonstrations against any measures for the increase prices for major energy and transport services and for the defense of the public sector. This proposal does not take into account the failure of the the unions to maintain the “system” of 1945 (the CNR – Conseil national de la Résistance program), but seeks to replace them in the same kind of great counterproductive masses, without advancing what could have been demands-actions of the movement, such as the constitution of local committees against the payment of the increase in the price of electricity, that could join those already in place against Linky electricity meters, etc.
- In short, while it advocates popular or citizens re-appropriation and is truly a grassroots movement and of the grassroots, the difficulty it has in actually taking root in daily struggles, at this level, and joining with what already exists (associative struggles, struggles against police violence in the suburbs and elsewhere) push it to launch global calls that not only are unlikely to be heard, but do not correspond to its original and unique characteristics . But of course, in the face of such criticism, which occasionally arises in general assemblies, the eternal social-statist reason arises and most often imposes its reality principle by this simple sentence: “Are you then against public services? “. One finds oneself then in a dead end.
- What made the originality and strength of the movement in its ascending phase, namely its break with many theoretical a priori and ritualised practices to the point of being strained, turns into weakness in the downward phase, when all that transpires is its instability, its lack of organisation and its difficulty to take the initiative, to surprise again. To the point that to continue, it is ready to abandon its historical singularity so as to mould itself into forms of mediation that are themselves in crisis. When official “social movements” are no longer able to do 1995, some yellow vests think that they can succeed at it and in addition see this as a panacea, when this whole system was still based on the centrality of work in the process of the valorisation of the capital, on the one hand, and when the definition of social relations, on the other hand, was still based on this same centrality (employees/non-employees, contributions/benefits).
- The result of the European elections must question the movement, to the extent that the surprise came from the interest shown in the elections (moreover European) from protagonists of the yellow vests’ movement denying precisely the legitimacy of representatives, including theirs! We then arrived at the absurd positions of some calling to vote for anyone except Macron and “yellow” lists [yellow vest candidates]! All this confusion comes, in addition to the electoral illusion, from the fact that the movement thinks itself as the “people” and therefore inevitably the majority. Yet the historical examples are instructive: if elections can lead to an insurrectional surge (Spain 1936 and to a lesser degree France with the victory of the Popular Front, Chile 1973), a strong and even insurrectional movement followed by an election brings only sores and bumps (June 68, spring 2019).
- A movement which, since the beginning, played non-institutional cards in the elaboration of its relation of power and which sometimes seeks to concretise them in medium-term views, such as those of the “wild RIC”. A prospect which suddenly collapsed under the blows of a Macron not sanctioned by the ballot box. We understand that some yellow vests want to make voting mandatory, when 50% of registered voters abstain; not to mention the non-registered. But what will it take to get people to vote “well”? This is a question that has often led politicians and even activists to want to “exchange the people” ... when it does not match their expectations. But it came from groups or parties that had or wanted power. The yellow vests are not in this category: they are before themselves and can not despair of the people while now brushing with despair.
- This difficulty, peculiar to our period after the class struggle, is that everywhere today we are witness to a resurrection of the notion of the people. In the history of modernity, the people want to be a whole, which is the negation of class contradictions, as they are only a sum of particular interests. This is the basis of the opposition between the bourgeois and the “bras-nus” during the French Revolution, to use the Daniel Guérin’s terminology ... and at the same time, their unity in the idea of “the fatherland in danger” of 1792, which must weld the people become the social body of the Nation. In this vision, it is the people who suffer all the wrongs. It is the general interest made a people against the enemies from the outside (emigrant aristocrats, imperial and royal powers from abroad). Fascism will take up this image of the people-totality against “internal” enemies, but foreign to the nation and to the race (Jews, Freemasons, gypsies, homosexuals). It is the basis of Carl Schmitt’s theories about the state of exception that delimits the “boundaries” between friends and foes. But to return to the revolutionary theses born of the French Revolution, Marx breaks with this idea of a people-totality in a critical thesis on Hegel (in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*), where he reverses the Hegelian dialectic to make of a class, the proletariat, the class-totality, because it would not suffer any particular harm to the extent that it suffers them all. It is then this potential totality that transforms this immediately particular class into the revolutionary class par excellence, or more exactly, the class of the revolution.
- Without knowing it expressly, it is this thesis that the yellow vests assert by proclaiming the state of social urgency on the part of a new popular totality suffering a general wrong beyond the particular wrongs suffered by each of its fractions or segments. A new “all” therefore, without historical determination or any messianic essence, but based on the idea more or less commonly shared that everything is going from bad to worse, that the situation is becoming unbearable and that the dominant ones, whoever they are (political representatives, capitalists and the rich), do not care.
- It is precisely because this wrong is felt as general that it does not need to rely on facts and statistics and that what is “felt” is

what counts in the revolt and the spirit of resistance. The urgency exceeds its social character to become vital in an utopia of equality ... this in the country, however, that is the least unequal among the rich countries and where the welfare state still produces its relative effects, by contrast to the situation in the neighbouring countries. However, redistribution no longer follows the same process and does not have the same effects when it is no longer centered on work and social partners, but on a vague universalism assumed by the State through taxes (cf. the CMU) and taxes imposed upon everyone, regardless of their position in relation to production relations and work.

- The yellow vests' movement was not necessarily made up of employees and, in any case, "guaranteed" or "stable" employees have little to do with the figures that show that wages have increased on average, when spending constraints have suffered an even bigger increase still, something that they feel directly when it comes to filling the fridge or freezer. The movement is therefore by nature voluntarist and subjectivist, since it is a question of "forcing" the numbers, to go from resentment to revolt. This necessary coup de force constrains it and contains it in a minority position, even though it fantasises its majority dimension ("We Are All Yellow Vests"), which can only come back on it as a boomerang in the moments of the movement's deceleration.
- It is also this feeling that collapses before the result of the elections. Either the people do not vote (50% abstention + about 10% non-registered + all the "foreigners" who do not have the right to vote) and it is then the failure of the "citizen's vote"; either s/he votes badly when s/he does vote ... and no RIC can do much about that. The illusion of the RIC is to rely on the fact that the "people" would not be divided by capitalist social relations, which nevertheless traverse the whole of the division of labor and the hierarchies which it produces; all of the divisions of status that allow, for example, yellow vests to participate in joint demonstrations with the White Coats in the defense of public health care services, as if "White Coats" defined that fraction of the people that would constitute the "hospital people". Therefore, involuntarily or not, an outrageous hospital hierarchy is masked, a hierarchy that is also responsible for the dysfunction of the public hospital and furthermore denounced in the cries for help by emergency ward doctors.

So many "results" or non-quantitative gains, but qualitative gains that make the yellow vests' uprising a historic moment of inversion of the too ordinary course of exploitation and domination. A moment that refutes all political accountants in the service of the capitalism of the summit, without yet opening for us a way out.

Temps Critiques, June 10-13, 2019

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References

[1] – Cf. "Si t'as envie de vivre, tu décourbes ton dos" in L'évènement Gilets jaunes, .../temps critiques, éd. À plus d'un titre, 2019.

[2] – A strong trend in big cities, even though it originated in Commercy. A third is planned at Montceau-les-Mines at the end of June.

[3] – A strong tendency on the roundabouts and within the "periphery" groups. Under what label they will present themselves, this remains a mystery since the yellow vests' lists are globally disavowed.

[4] – Revue Temps critiques n° 19 : "Les luttes : de la coexistence à la coextension ?": <http://tempscritiques.free.fr/spip.php?article377>

[5] – High school students wounded by the rubber bullets, those humiliated Mantes-la-Jolie, were suddenly praised as conscious and responsible young people, showing the example to their elders! While the many severely wounded yellow vests in the demonstrations of the first weeks have received only "they were looking for it" or "it will teach them" from the intellectuals and the dominant castes.

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